
FAQ

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Torah, division of commandments

J.K. McKee revised 13 August, 2019

How am I to appropriately understand the division of the Torah's commandments?

Yeshua the Messiah did teach us that there were “weightier provisions of the law,” such as “justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). He affirms that the greatest of the Torah's commandments are the admonitions to love the Lord God and to love one's neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28; cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). It is a fact that there is a prioritization among the Torah's commandments between those that carry more weight and those that may be considered “least” (Matthew 5:19), especially as there are differing penalties for the violation of various regulations. The teaching of our Messiah does indicate that the Torah's commandments are divided in some way. Determining what this way is, however, has been a matter of theological discussion and debate for millennia.

Greg L. Bahnsen makes the important remark, “Christians throughout the history of the church who have advocated the authority of the Old Testament law in Christian moral instruction, such as the Reformers or Puritans, have not...done so because they make Moses the locus of their authority! Rather and more realistically, they have done so only because their true Lord and Authority, Jesus Christ, directs them to honor and obey the moral commandments of Moses.”¹ In Reformed Christian theology (and to a lesser extent historic Wesleyan theology) the commandments of the Torah have been classified under the broad categories of: moral, civil, and ceremonial. It is believed that with the coming of Yeshua and His sacrifice, the civil and ceremonial laws of Ancient Israel have been abolished, but never the Torah's commandments regulating ethics and morality which are to remain true for all people of all times. Reformed expositors interpret passages such as Ephesians 2:14-15 and Colossians 2:14 as relating to the annulment of not the Torah as a whole, but rather the ceremonial and civil law.

In the Twenty-First Century when the evangelical Church has largely cast aside any of the Torah as relevant instruction for Believers today, we as Messianics should rejoice with our Christian brethren who have always held the Torah's ethical commands as *always* having relevance! We have more in agreement with them than in disagreement, as the same Biblical passages we look to for the continued validity of the Torah are the same passages they look to for the importance of the “moral law.” However, is the classification of the Torah's commandments into moral, civil, and ceremonial laws something that is entirely accurate? No one would doubt that there are Torah commandments that appear to be moral, civil, or ceremonial—but does the Torah itself divide its commandments this way? This may be a place where the Jewish theological tradition can step in and provide us with another perspective.

Of the 613 categorized commandments in the Chumash/Pentateuch, it is held that there are 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. The negative commandments would largely relate to various prohibitions placed upon God's people (i.e., the Sixth Commandment which forbids murder), but positive commandments could largely relate to things that would help God's people and others in the larger community such as allowing the poor to glean one's field. Within the Torah, we see its *mitzvot* (מִצְוֹת) often classified among three distinct categories:

¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, “Response to Douglas Moo,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 391.

1. *edot* (עדות): “warning signs, reminders, urgings” (CHALOT).²
2. *chuyim* (חוקים): “divine statute[s]” (CHALOT).³
3. *mishpatim* (משפטים): “decision by arbitration, legal decision” (CHALOT).⁴

Each one of these various divisions denotes a degree of significance for a Torah commandment. *Edot* would be those things that God has placed for His people to be safe and for their well-being. *Chuyim* are often likened to things that do not make logical sense to the human mind, but God has told His people to follow them to demonstrate proper obedience. *Mishpatim* would be the closest thing to what we would call case laws, things that one can turn to when trying to evaluate what would be the best decision in a situation that would be in line with God’s will and character.

While these are three broad categories of commandments, seen within the Torah itself, the Oral Torah as seen in the Mishnah and Talmud demonstrates that the Rabbis have spent considerable time into classifying the commandments (and their application/non-application) even further. The six significant divisions in the Mishnah, from the Second Century C.E., include:

1. Agriculture
2. Appointed times
3. Women
4. Order of Damages
5. Holy things
6. Purities⁵

From those broad headings the Torah’s commandments are often further divided into various sub-categories as titled by the Mishnah tractates, and the Talmud which is essentially commentary on the Mishnah.

The division of commandments seen in the Mishnah does appear to be much more natural from a reading of the Torah than the traditional Reformed Christian division of moral law, civil law, and ceremonial law. We would suggest that considering the Torah’s commandments from the classifications offered by the Mishnah would be better for today’s Messianic movement, especially as it is a major part of our Jewish theological heritage.

Of course, determining what part (if any) the Oral Torah and its commentary would play in our emerging Messianic theology and Torah *halachah* is another issue altogether. Many believe it should not be considered. But we believe that it should not be removed from the conversation of our Biblical Studies as we wrestle with how to properly live out the Torah today. Yet, this conversation should also include linguistic and historical analysis, comparison of the Pentateuch with other Ancient Near Eastern law codes, and most significantly the life example of Yeshua and His Apostles. Along with such analysis will come a realization of which commandments are “greater” compared to commandments that are “least.” And as always, when tradition is considered we must not forget the instruction given by Paul in Philippians 4:8:

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

² CHALOT, 266.

³ Ibid., 114.

⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁵ English titles are taken from the Table of Contents in Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).